

**Interview with: Erik FREEMAN**  
**Interview by: Richard KILLBLANE**  
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**Reviewed, edited and approved 3/28/03 Erik FREEMAN**

**KILLBLANE:** Could you tell me about how you enlisted in the Army and got to Vietnam?

**FREEMAN:** I was having trouble at home and I left school. I was able to enlist in the Army at Benton Harbor, Michigan, and went to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, for basic training and truck driving school. I went to medium truck driving school. From there I was sent to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and I was sent to the Army Artillery and Missile School for training on OCS [Officer Candidacy School] students and self-propelled howitzers. If I wasn't going to be a driver I didn't want to be there so I volunteered for Vietnam.

**KILLBLANE:** Why did you want to be a driver?

**FREEMAN:** That's what I went in the Army for. I wanted to be a truck driver because that's what I was trained for. Then all of a sudden I'm hanging around with a bunch of tracked howitzers and going to artillery firepower demonstrations. It was nice because I got four tracked vehicles on my driver's license, but it's one of deals where, "Okay, if I'm going to go to Vietnam do I want to be in artillery or do I want to be in transportation?" I wanted to be in transportation, so I volunteered for Vietnam and I was sent right away.

**KILLBLANE:** When and where did you arrive?

**FREEMAN:** It would have been August of '67, but I got leave, so I was there in September of '67. I went to Cam Ranh Bay and ran convoys to as far south as Phan Thiet. We also went into the mountains at Bhen Me Thuot / Da Lat, and we went to Ninh Hoa, Nha Trang, and up to Tuy Hoa. Then they were looking for volunteers for a platoon that was going to take tankers up to the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] at Dong Ha. I volunteered to go up there, and we loaded about 18 tractors and 5,000 gal tankers on a big LST [Landing Ship Transport]. I think it was the *Page*; I remember that name because later it came up on a web site.

**KILLBLANE:** Which Company were you with?

**FREEMAN:** I was with the 670<sup>th</sup>.

**KILLBLANE:** 670<sup>th</sup>.

**FREEMAN:** Transportation Company.

**KILLBLANE:** When did you go up to . . .

**FREEMAN:** It was around Christmas of '67. They took us up and loaded us on smaller LCUs [Landing Craft, Utility], and took us down the Cua Viet River and dropped us off right in Dong Ha. We drove right in. We were a platoon, a tanker platoon. We were assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines [3<sup>rd</sup> Marine Division] in Dong Ha and we went on all their convoys. These were not Army convoys. We took petroleum tankers from Dong Ha to Camp Evans, which was the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav [1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division] Base, and we also went into Camp Carol, which was past a rockpile up towards Khe Sanh, but in '67 the road was not open past that point. You couldn't take the road into Khe Sanh. They had closed the road, so everything was being flown in.

**KILLBLANE:** This was when the siege [at Khe Sanh] was taking place?

**FREEMAN:** Everything was going from Camp Carol in by helicopter. That was my tour there. I went through Tet of '68 in Dong Ha, and the ammo dump was blown up. Convoy security was pretty much non-existent. That's what got me. When I finished my tour and I was leaving, I flew to Da Nang, and then flew from Da Nang back to Cam Ranh. And when I'm sitting in Cam Ranh waiting to leave country - you could be sitting around for hours sometimes - I was talking to guys and this guy said, "You should see what they're building in the Central Highlands. You should see these gun trucks that they're building." They started talking about armored trucks and machine guns on them and they were getting named. I can't remember any names of trucks; I don't even know if he told me any of the names of the trucks. When I came back to stateside duty it kept grinding on me.

**KILLBLANE:** What kept grinding on you?

**FREEMAN:** These trucks. They were going to run convoys the way they should be run, with some security. Our security was that sometimes they would send Quad 50s along, or the lead jeep would be a jeep with a 105 recoilless rifle on it. That's not convoy security. Then sometimes they would have a jeep with an M60 on the back and a guy was sitting up on the spare tire, sitting up there with a flak jacket and a helmet on as a target. That, to me, was not security. I finished out my tour in the States and got out, but the civilians did not treat me very well; they didn't treat any of us very well. I didn't have a good family base to go back to, so I had to rely on my peers, and most of them were people who hadn't been to Vietnam and all the things they were hearing were that we were baby-killers because the media was just plowing us.

**KILLBLANE:** Yeah, '68 was the big turning point.

**FREEMAN:** Anything we did was wrong. "Were you at My Lai?" You know, there were only 30-some guys at My Lai and it was a pretty small deal, really. So, I re-enlisted because I needed to go to the Central Highlands. I wanted to go back to the Central Highlands, and I wanted to go to a petroleum unit because I was used to tankers. So, that's how I came to wind up with the 359<sup>th</sup> [Transportation Company].

**KILLBLANE:** Let's back up. When you were up there at I Corps, did you run anything out of Wunder Beach?



**FREEMAN:** We ran to Wunder Beach. There was a pipeline being dropped off. 5<sup>th</sup> Mech [5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (Mechanized)] set up a pipeline on Wunder Beach for off-loading. We went down and loaded up. That didn't last long because they had so much trouble getting the tankers in and out of there.

**KILLBLANE:** Why is that?

**FREEMAN:** Because the road was almost all sand. It was bad so that didn't last very long.

**KILLBLANE:** Actually, they ran Wunder Beach until about September of '68, and it was a monsoon that came in and shut it down.

**FREEMAN:** Okay. I remember sitting down there, and 5<sup>th</sup> Mech had just come in. Everything was new; everything they brought in was brand spanking new. Everything. They were new to country. We would run down to Hue, too. We ran somewhere south of Hue. We would run down to south of Hue and unload for A-Shau Valley because there was a drop-off point down there. That was pretty scary because I don't think you could go any farther south than A-Shau Valley. I don't think you could go any farther than Da Nang at that time because the roads were closed for a portion of time down there. I can remember guys talking about taking reefers down there because they had to transport body bags down there in reefers. I want to say we were running Camp Evans for 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav and up to Camp Carol over the rockpile.

**KILLBLANE:** Where were you at when Tet broke out?

**FREEMAN:** We were in camp. We had cloud cover, so there were no helicopters up and we couldn't run convoys. They couldn't get convoys up.

**KILLBLANE:** Which camp?

**FREEMAN:** Dong Ha. That was ugly. Every tent in Dong Ha had a bunker at the end of it and you didn't go anywhere. You just ran straight into the bunker.

**KILLBLANE:** Did they hit your compound while you were there?

**FREEMAN:** They hit our compound. We were always getting hit in Dong Ha because they could reach us across the Cua Viet River. We were always getting mortared. That was an on-going thing. What was worse during Tet was that they hit our ammo dump, and our ammo dump was blown up. And these 155 and 175 [mm] projectiles were just blowing up in the air. There was no noise or nothing, these things were just dropping. It was like somebody sitting up in the air and dropping a rock on you. They made no noise, no warning. They were just dropping out of the air on the compound and they'd go, "Spuuh." We had to pretty much stay in the bunkers until this thing quit cooking off. That was really bad.

**KILLBLANE:** How long did that last?

**FREEMAN:** A day and a half. They had mermite [cooking fuel] cans cooking C-rations and they'd heat up C-rations in these big gallon cans. They had the kerosene heaters, and you could run over to the mess hall and get something and run back to the bunker. The deal was that no matter where you went, you were running. It was, "I think I might want to walk so I don't run into one of these things." That was pretty big, and of course we'd started hearing how every base in Vietnam got it. And we were thinking, "Oh shit man, they're going to overrun us. We're going to be overrun." That was pretty scary. I was still 19 years old, I guess, almost 20.

**KILLBLANE:** How did your attitude change as far as the stress factor while driving is concerned? Because you're sitting on top of five thousand gallons of explosive fuel, right? If one RPG [Rocket-Propelled Grenade] hit you, you'd have been incinerated, there was no escape.

**FREEMAN:** For me, the truck or tanker getting hit was never the biggest thing, it was getting shot. "What are you going to do if you get shot?" Getting shot meant that somebody's pretty close. Whereas if an RPG or mortar hit you, it would be random like, "I was in the wrong place at the wrong time." It wasn't somebody saying, "I'm coming to get you." If somebody shot you they'd have been looking right down their barrel at you. They meant to get you. I always thought about that. Getting shot would have been worse than actually having your truck hit a mine or hit an RPG or get blown up, that stuff was kind of random. They were trying to hit somebody; maybe it was you, maybe it was whoever it hit.

**KILLBLANE:** How did that change when you first arrived? What was your attitude? Do you go through a series of phases till you finally get that short-timers attitude? Could you describe that to me?

**FREEMAN:** In Dong Ha I never really got it because in Dong Ha there was a certain number of trucks and a certain number of drivers and that was a done deal. You drove until your replacement came in. They actually had to get a replacement for you up there because there were no extra guys. So, you were waiting for somebody to get a replacement up there so you could fly back to Cam Ranh and go to the out-processing center.

**KILLBLANE:** So, you didn't get shutdown period until you flew out of Dong Ha.

**FREEMAN:** I flew to Da Nang, and from Da Nang I flew to Cam Ranh. I had orders to go to a processing center straight there, so I didn't even go back to my original company, the 670<sup>th</sup>, for out-processing. It had all been done. The company clerk at Dong Ha took care of it and I went straight to the processing center.

**KILLBLANE:** When it got within a month of your time there, did you begin to worry about it?

**FREEMAN:** I don't know.

**KILLBLANE:** You just don't remember it?

**FREEMAN:** I don't remember it.



**KILLBLANE:** Before and after Tet . . . You mentioned how you were a little more worried about that?

**FREEMAN:** As a group, we kind of worried more because we were on the DMZ. You know, "We're on the DMZ, we're right here."

**KILLBLANE:** You could see it from there, couldn't you?

**FREEMAN:** Right. You were driving parallel to it, probably a mile and a half south of it, when you went down the road. What was it?

**KILLBLANE:** Route Nine, I think.

**FREEMAN:** Nine, QL Nine. You thought about that as being there, then all of a sudden Tet comes and you get these reports from all over Vietnam, from Long Binh, An Khe, Pleiku. Every place that had a name got hit. It was like, "It's not just us, and it's everywhere." When we went up to the DMZ it was like going to the front. I think that Tet made us realize as drivers up there that it didn't really matter where you were at. Everybody was getting hit or shot at. No more, "All those guys down south are a bunch of pussies." I think that may have changed a little bit. We weren't alone in this thing.

**KILLBLANE:** Were you ambushed at any time during your first tour?

**FREEMAN:** We had small arms ambushes once in a while, but the Marines never stopped the convoys. You just kept the whole convoy moving.

**KILLBLANE:** It was just more harassment?

**FREEMAN:** It was more harassment, I think. It was always up around the rockpile, because that was the only place you really were close to anything. The rest of the way along Kilo Nine was pretty open. The rockpile was the only place you really had to go up, over, and down something, and that wasn't very big. It was a pretty straightforward run. It was just dusty and hot like every place else.

**KILLBLANE:** Talk about your second tour.

**FREEMAN:** The second tour I came back into country with the 359 [359<sup>th</sup> Transportation Company]. I think I was SPC5 [Specialist-5] already. I think I got SPC5 for re-enlisting. So I walked in and it was a whole different deal. You were a veteran and you knew all this shit. You got off the airplane in Cam Ranh Bay, sniffed and, "Yeah, this is Nam, I know this well." All these others guys were hearing you because you had your unit patch and some cabbage on your chest. And these others guys are going, "Oh, wow man." The bravado came out, and you couldn't help but sniff and, "Yeah, yeah, I've smelled this dinky dog place before." You went down and said, "Where's the damn truck that's going to take me to the compound?" It wasn't like, "Well, how are we going to get there? What are we going to do? It was a whole different attitude. I walked in and I introduced myself to the first sergeant and I said, "I'm here to be a

gun truck NCOIC.” And he went, “Okay, well get in fucking line. You and every other E-5 wants to be on a gun truck.” He was a great top.

**KILLBLANE:** What was his name?

**FREEMAN:** Willard H. Self. He was great. I got in and got established, got barracks, got assigned to a platoon and stuff. It was weird. The 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon, which is what I got assigned to, was still in Pleiku, but they were going to be moving down. He said, “Well, I’m not going to send you to Pleiku, you’re going to stay here. Since you’re so hot-to-trot to have a gun truck, I’ll tell you what, I’ll make you a proposition. We haven’t had a Driver or a Truck of the Month in 359<sup>th</sup> since we’ve been here.” The battalion used to have this little contest every month for all the companies in the compound at Phu Thai, and they would try for Driver and Truck of the Month to try and keep moral and esprit de corps up. He said, “You get me Driver or Truck of the Month, I’ll get you on your gun truck.” They assigned me a pretty good bobtail that wasn’t some rag and said, “You’ve got to work on this in your spare time because you’ve still got to run convoys. You’ve got a month and a half to get this thing ready.” It was the middle of the month or something, and the contest was going to be on a certain date. I said, “Okay, I’m gung-ho.” So, I drove my daily convoys. And they made them pretty good convoys, like I’d go to An Khe and turn around so I could be back in by two o’clock. And I worked till eight or nine o’clock at night when it was dark or whatever. However late you wanted to work, they didn’t give a shit. If you wanted to go over to the motor pool and work all night, it was really no big deal as long as you were ready to go on a convoy in the morning. So I scrounged and screwed around. I don’t know if you looked at the photo album over there.

**KILLBLANE:** I looked at some of them.

**FREEMAN:** Okay. I don’t know if you noticed a bobtail that had an orange grill, all touched up, with every detail painted into it. You need to look at it because that’s the whole story of how I made Truck of the Month that month for 359<sup>th</sup>. I didn’t make Driver of the Month because I had a lousy attitude. I couldn’t keep my uniforms looking like they should’ve for an E-5. I mean, you should have your grubbies and then you should have your good ones, but I didn’t care. I put on what Mama-sanh washed for me in the morning, I went out and drove convoy, then I worked on the truck and got it greasy. Mama-sanh would do the best she could with it, but sometimes they were pretty sorry looking. I wasn’t very articulate in presenting myself as far as being Driver of the Month and knowing the right information from your logbook. Somebody else was clearly better suited for that, but I, obviously by far, had the best truck.

**KILLBLANE:** So, you weren’t concerned about the show, you were concerned more about the performance?

**FREEMAN:** Well, yes and no. I’m kind of a glitzy guy, too. I want to be able to catch your eye. There’s a whole lot of people in this world that perform, but they do their day-in and day-out grind with absolutely zero glitz so that they never catch anybody’s eye. You wouldn’t know them, they’re just some G.I Joe who’s doing their job. Remember, a lot of these guys were drafted and just wanted to do their time and go home.. I wasn’t quite that subtle. If I was going to work my ass off, and I was going to perform, I was going to make sure that you knew it. The



bobtail that I did was detailed. You'll see it. It was an attention-getter, but it was detailed. The Untouchable was the same thing. When I built that truck, I knew we were going to perform. We were going to have great firepower, and I was going to have more and better radios than anybody else. But I was going to build a truck that was clean, a truck that was going to catch your eye. You were going to see that truck and say, "[Whistle] That truck's sharp." I've always wanted to get accolades for my work, so I'm not going to give it away.

**KILLBLANE:** It's not your personal dress you're talking about, it's your truck.

**FREEMAN:** Yes. I'm pretty much the same way now. You could dress me up and I'm still going to be a pig-in-a-blanket. It just isn't going to change. My wife does the best with me as she can. But my pick-up at home is a '94 pick-up with no dents in it. Its got nice extractable aluminum black running boards on it. It's got the black smoke nose guard on it. It's got sprayed-on bed liner, and a simple pinstripe down the side. But, people look at my truck and, "Oh man, what year is it? That truck looks like it's brand new." But it's a truck that's never broke down a day that I've had it and it's nine years old. I think I've kind of counted on my equipment to perform for me and make me look good, and so far in my life, it's worked pretty good. Anyway, to get back to the 359<sup>th</sup>, you walked in with a totally different swagger. Walking back in with a year underneath your belt as an E-5, you didn't take anything off of anybody. Even guys that were already there in the company - established - were like, "They've got a veteran back in. Dong Ha . . . Quang Tri . . . no kidding? We've got some guys we just sent up there." At the time they had sent some replacement trucks up there. People sure were treating me a hell of a lot better than they treated me back on the streets at home. So, it was home to me. I was fortunate in the sense that I never, ever, ever, wanted to do drugs. It was not something I ever wanted to do. I smoked a joint one night and fell off a log and I said, "That was it. That's crap and I'm not interested in that." I was not a big drinker, though I would drink. I will drink now but I'm not a drunk. I'll drink more beer here this week than I'll drink in a month at home. So, the truck became focus. Then they had the ambush.

**KILLBLANE:** So, you won Truck of the Month and that's what gave you your truck?

**FREEMAN:** Right. I was still driving, but now I was in line to get the next truck that became available, even if it wasn't in the same platoon. He said, "I'll transfer you to another platoon." There was Misfits and there was Brutus, but Rich Bond hadn't been on Brutus that long. As a matter of fact, Bond wasn't on Brutus yet. Cagle was still running Brutus. They got hit in the (Mang Yang) Pass, and Callison got killed. Ball of Confusion got shot up but nobody got killed. There was an injury on it and the driver wanted nothing to do with the truck. He'd been injured and wanted nothing to do with the truck. Everybody else pretty well wanted off the truck, too. They were getting short.

**FREEMAN:** They were getting short. It was like, "Okay, it's time to pull the plug." They were in the process of pulling this whole platoon back to Phu Thai anyway.

**KILLBLANE:** Ball of Confusion?

**FREEMAN:** That's the the truck came back from Pleiku and was assigned to Phu Thai. I got the truck and we got it running. It was a sorry truck. This truck was old. It was a deuce and a half [2½-ton truck] in a 5-ton company. It had a short box with two 50s [caliber machine guns], two 60s [M60s], and one radio. I didn't like the name of the truck. The truck itself, running-wise, was a rag. The truck blew up on us, and I would never admit to anybody, ever, that we intentionally blew the turbo off of the truck one night. We were coming back in and I said, "We cannot continue to do this day after day, it can't happen." We came around the corner about ¼ mile from the compound doing about fifty [miles per hour], kicked it into second gear, and let out on the clutch. It wound up way too tight - the turbo did - and we pulled it in and said, "Well, this truck bit the dust. It's no good anymore." And I don't know how this occurred, but all my life I've had a little angel over my shoulder. I'd put it in the same category as Bill building that truck. I went to the battalion and the battalion had a supply truck that was almost new, and it was a 5-ton. I somehow convinced a major in battalion S-4 supply to trade with the 359<sup>th</sup> for a 2½-ton. And we got that 5-ton truck transferred to 359<sup>th</sup> from battalion. It was almost new and it was one of the new Mack trucks. I look back on it now and, "What did I say? Who did I convince?" I don't know if he believed in me, or believed the 359<sup>th</sup> needed another truck, or believed in gun trucks. I had no concept of what I was going to build, I just needed a truck to put my gun box on. I wasn't Mr. I-got-a-game-plan-here and, "Major, here's what I want to do." I had no idea how I got that truck, but I did. We got the 5-ton truck assigned, and you talk about some guys that were jealous. This was a great truck. Then as we started building it, we scrounged armored plate from wherever and started putting the truck together. We had to do this in a pretty short amount of time because they were down a gun truck.

**KILLBLANE:** How long did you have the other truck before it broke down?

**FREEMAN:** I don't know. I'd have to say maybe a month, three weeks. I don't know. I know that I was already scrounging weapons while we were still in Ball of Confusion running convoys. I was scrounging parts for weapons.

**KILLBLANE:** You were already building your mini-guns?

**FREEMAN:** I was already scrounging mini-gun parts, and trying to figure out how they worked.

**KILLBLANE:** How were you getting those?

**FREEMAN:** I don't know where I got the two gun bodies, because that was the whole thing, the bodies were the whole story. You get a body of a mini-gun and everything else is throw-in: Bolts, barrels, de-linkers, belts, whatever, it didn't matter. I honestly had no clue how they worked. I look back on this and it's all amazing to me. I was doing this kind of lone-wolf because Ross had to drive, Braswell had to drive, and Logan wasn't assigned to the truck yet. I originally had Ross, and Braswell was the driver. Ross was an E-5, too. I got to start working on the truck and putting it together. You know, the day that the gun box went back up in the new truck, there should have been pictures. Should have been a picture that day. I was a picture-taking guy. I had a camera. I loved taking pictures, I loved that stuff. All of this. I've seen two pictures so far this weekend that I need to get copies of from these guys somehow that show the



truck without the name on the side and the truck without the lettering on the tailgate. I'd never had those pictures. Those are kind of interesting because of the timeframe.

**KILLBLANE:** So, the sequence of building the truck . . . What did you start with?

**FREEMAN:** At the bottom.

**KILLBLANE:** So, you got the box.

**FREEMAN:** I got a box. I got certain 50s and M60s that were assigned to this truck, and then got an M79 assigned to this truck. There was a foot locker, too. For me it was extending the box and making it a maintenance truck, because that was part of the deal. It had to be a maintenance truck, it couldn't just be a gun truck.

**KILLBLANE:** Why?

**FREEMAN:** Because the 359<sup>th</sup> needed a maintenance truck.

**KILLBLANE:** What was the role of a maintenance truck?

**FREEMAN:** The last truck of the convoy, always, so trucks don't get left behind. You either got them to the next compound, or if it was a tanker, you got a bobtail under it. If the truck could continue under its own power to the next compound, it went to the next compound. You made sure it stayed there until a New Yorker convoy came in. Convoys were Friscos or New Yorkers, one of the two, depending on whether they were going east or west.

**KILLBLANE:** Southbound was Frisco?

**FREEMAN:** No. I don't know what they were called. The Pleiku runs from out of Qui Nhon were Frisco convoys. And if you were running from out of Pleiku back to Qui Nhon, you were running a New Yorker. You waited for a convoy returning out of Pleiku. You picked up on the back of that convoy and you went back to Qui Nhon if your bobtail was still running. If it wasn't still running, you either had to wait till we returned and we towed you in, or a wrecker had to come out from Qui Nhon and pick you up. Something had to happen if you couldn't continue on. If you were beyond the An Khe Pass and couldn't make it, we towed you into An Khe and dropped you off; then we would catch up with the convoy. My interpretation of my job or role was that you did not leave a vehicle. You could never leave a vehicle unsecured. Ever. You stayed with them if you couldn't tow them or move them, or you towed them. Paul will tell you that what made us so proud as a maintenance truck was there were times when we pulled loaded 5,000 gallon tankers with that truck.

**KILLBLANE:** With a 5-ton cargo truck!?

**FREEMAN:** With a 5 ton cargo truck. We hooked up to them with a towbar and towed them in.

**KILLBLANE:** How far did you tow them?

**FREEMAN:** We returned them back from as far as the bottom of the An Khe [Pass]. We took them back in, and then turned around and caught back up with the convoy. Some of those things are really fond memories for us. We did a recovery in an ambush. The convoy got hit somewhere between the Mang Yang [Pass] and that little LZ [Landing Zone], between “Ambush Alley” and the pass.

**KILLBLANE:** Between the Mang Yang and An Khe Passes.

**FREEMAN:** Yeah, but you got An Khe, then you’ve got an LZ, then you’ve got “Ambush Alley,” then you got the Mang Yang Pass.

**KILLBLANE:** The LZ was where 1<sup>st</sup> Cav was? Or was it the 173<sup>rd</sup> [173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade]?

**FREEMAN:** I don’t know what this LZ was. I don’t know.

**KILLBLANE:** I’m not familiar with the LZ, then.

**FREEMAN:** There’s an LZ. Anyway, this convoy of cargo trucks got hit. They couldn’t stay, they needed to keep moving with their security vehicles. We talked to our convoy commander, and he authorized us to drop off, and we dropped off and did recovery on seven vehicles. We changed twenty-seven tires that day, and got every truck cleared off the road before dark.

**KILLBLANE:** Twenty-seven tires?

**FREEMAN:** Their tires had been flattened.

**KILLBLANE:** How many tires did you have on the back of your truck?

**FREEMAN:** we only had six, so We took and singled out any tires that were good on their duals. We singled them all out, and changed their front tires and got them rolling. We would take them off and move them to get their front tires back up. We used our tires and we singled out the gun truck tires to get the trucks in. We recovered every vehicle that had been left behind, so the convoy commander wrote a Commendation. That’s what that Commendation’s all about. We did not leave any of his vehicles unsecured that day before dark. They were either in or running. That, to me, was the role of a maintenance truck. If you got in an ambush, you got in an ambush. Your main goal was to secure a broken-down vehicle and get it repaired or back running. We did lots of repairs and got trucks going. Small stuff, like guys trucks overheating. We would get water cans, go down to the rice patties, get water, and get the vehicle cooled back down again. If it was a radiator hose, what could we do? Could we cut that, shorten it, do what with it? Whatever it took, we got the truck moving again.

**KILLBLANE:** How tall are you?

**FREEMAN:** About six foot.



**KILLBLANE:** Because Paul thinks your eight feet tall.

**FREEMAN:** [Laughter] At the time, he was a blond-haired, blue-eyed kid sitting behind a typewriter. Seeing guys come in on a “Gun truck” is bugging the shit out of him. I wish I would have got Paul in there sooner. He was a treasure. He’s been a great friend, and he’s a super person. He worked harder than anybody I ever got on that truck. He wanted to please, and I was impossible to please. I couldn’t please myself. A lot of the guys didn’t realize that I was a hardass just to be a hardass. I couldn’t please myself, I couldn’t do enough myself, and so the guys were not going to be able do enough. My thing was that I wanted that truck to always be thought of, When somebody said something about the Untouchable, I wanted them to say, “It was the best damn maintenance/gun truck you could ever want in your convoy”.

**KILLBLANE:** How did you go about recruiting your team and training them up?

**FREEMAN:** If you needed a driver, you had to watch tanker drivers. You had to watch to see who seemed to always get their truck, who could get up the pass, who was trouble-free, who didn’t screw up, who didn’t break down all the time and break vehicles. You tried to look for somebody who was a good stick, who could do the job, who was there everyday in convoys, who was not getting drunk. You tried to pick guys like that. You didn’t want guys who were out getting screwed up every single night and coming in dragging and not worth a shit the next day. Guys that would work hard. That was the whole thing on that maintenance truck. It was the same as a gun truck, but with all the extra junk, the baggage that went along with it.

**KILLBLANE:** Describe it.

**FREEMAN:** You would come in with five flats on the back of that truck. We rolled down to the tire shop and took those tires off for the tire boy. Somebody had to fix it, and if there weren’t five tires to put back up in there the next morning before we left for convoy, we had to go down and load five tires. You were loading five tires in the morning when you’re semi-clean. You’ve showered and you’ve started the day fresh, and the first thing you did was load five tires in the morning. There was work that went along with it. I was pretty picky about having the truck be clean. I wanted the truck clean all the time. If we got in late, we went to the washrack. If we got in early and we could screw off, we went to the river and had the boy-sanhs wash the truck. You took care of your weapons, you took care of the truck, and then you took care of yourself. The gun truck guys could be cleaning out their weapons over the last ten miles of the convoy. They could probably have their guns all cleaned and everything done by the time they got in. They’d hop off the truck and then they’d be gone. They didn’t have that extra hour or so of work every night. Plus, all the gun truck guys did all day was sit on their butts all day unless their truck broke down, which very seldom happened to the gun trucks, or they had an ambush. Us, meanwhile, were stopping all day and working and catching up, stopping and working and catching up. It was a gun truck, but it was a lot more work than that. You had to have guys that were willing to put out that work.

**KILLBLANE:** What extra equipment did you have that a gun truck didn’t have?

**FREEMAN:** We had five or six tires extra, we had a tow bar, and we carried a stretcher. I don't know if anybody else carried a stretcher, but we did in case something happened. We carried a big bag of hand tools. We kept extra belts for the 5 tons, even though they were old belts. We would take some of the better belts; the maintenance shop would save them for us and we could put them on upper and lower radiator hoses. If they just got changed but they weren't totally gone, we'd keep a couple of those in there. We always had two gallons of brake fluid in the truck and a five-gallon can of oil. That's probably it, just stuff that kept the trucks going.

**KILLBLANE:** What are some of the problems that you encountered? Was it just stupidity on the driver's part?

**FREEMAN:** No. Well, yes and no. First echelon maintenance sucked over there. Drivers did not do their maintenance the way they were supposed to on the trucks. Some of the stuff was because they didn't assign trucks. Then you'd get a guy who got assigned KP duty one week so he couldn't drive or whatever. It'd be his turn for KP duty, so somebody else went and drove his truck all week. By the end of the week, the thing was a mess because this other guy didn't care about the truck. He was only driving it for one week. He got his truck back and he'd get all pissed off because the guy didn't wash it, he didn't check the oil, he never drained the air tanks. "What the hell's wrong with this guy?" There's a point of deterioration. The worst thing was guys not checking stuff. Maintenance was so overworked. We never had enough parts. We were always out of parts.

**KILLBLANE:** You were just driving those trucks into the ground?

**FREEMAN:** That's what was happening. When William told me what had happened when the brakes locked up in Atlanta, I thought, "This sounds like going on a convoy again, it's just the same old shit." Hydro-vacs were your worst enemy because we didn't know what to do about them. I couldn't do a thing about a hydro-vac locking up brakes on the road other than bleeding the brakes off and trying to get the truck rolling. That truck had to be towed then because you had to bleed the brakes off so it could roll, but you had to leave the bleeders open. You could not apply the brakes again because they'd lock right back up. That truck had to be towed, you had to drop the tanker to put another bobtail under it, and it had to go back in for hydro-vac. Looking at this whole trip now – thirty-one years later - tearing that hydro-vac apart and laying up underneath there on Sunday, that never happened in Nam. Nobody ever tore the hydro-vacs apart. The only thing wrong with those damn things was that the piston was seizing up in there, and it was an hour and a half worth of maintenance. It took an hour and a half in itself to take out, and another hour and a half to put back in. In an hour and a half you could've popped the front of the hydroback off, honed it up, cleaned it up, re-bled all the brakes, and had the truck running again without ever pulling the hydroback off the truck. I don't think anybody in the shop did that because it wasn't what you did in the Army. You never repaired a part in the Army; you took the part off, you put a replacement part on, and the other part went back in and got rebuilt.

**KILLBLANE:** That's depot maintenance.



**FREEMAN:** That's how it's done in the Army. What was really wrong with the hydro-vac didn't matter. "What's wrong with the turbo? . . . The seals are gone . . . Can we get seals and fix the turbos right here? . . . No." That was not how it was done. You took the turbo off and you put another turbo on. "What's wrong with the generator? What's wrong with the air compressor? . . . Maybe it's just O-rings . . . Maybe you just loosen this up, pop the top off, pop this up, put new O-rings on the compressor, put everything back together and it's working." That's not how the Army worked. In respect to the hydro-vacs, we didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to do. All I ever knew how to do was bleed the brakes off. Then we got the truck on a tow and it went back into the maintenance shop, and somebody else picked up the tanker and went in. When our gun truck went down with hydrobacks, I took it up to the shop. If they said, "I don't know if I'm going to be able to get to it," I would crawl under, take the hydroback off, lay it on the bench and say, "I want that back by morning. Put a new hydro-vac on, I want that truck ready to roll in the morning." It never even occurred to me at the time to analyze what it took to do this. But in Williams' place we had options. We had two spares around and guess what, the brakes were still locking up. We had to do something different there. So, we were forced into taking that next step of a non-military solution. It worked out okay. That's some information we wish we would have known over there because we could have saved ourselves a little grief. Getting up the pass, the guys couldn't keep their transmissions in gear. They'd stop, you'd have to block the wheels, and you'd have to change a bobtail on the pass. That was probably the worse thing to have to do.

**KILLBLANE:** Why?

**FREEMAN:** You were out there grabbing rocks or anything that you could get to keep the tankers from rolling back. Then you'd have to get the truck onto it, get the other bobtail underneath, and continue on up the mountain. The guy could drive it, he just couldn't drive in that gear because these transmissions would get to a point where they were so worn they would actually pop out of gear. You couldn't keep them in low gear. The biggest thing was: Did you have bobtails? You always tried to leave with one or two bobtails depending on the size of the convoy so that you could keep things going. And the bobtails themselves probably had something wrong with them when they left the yard, but they were running well enough as an emergency back-up to give you something. If something went wrong with this one, the problem on that one was going to be less; we just threw weight underneath it and drove it in. Maybe it didn't have headlights, or maybe it had a minor air leak. It was good, because the maintenance part really made the time fly and I think probably kept us out of trouble; we didn't have time to go down to the village as much. We were pretty busy and tired, always tired. There was nothing to be done at nine o'clock at night. The mess hall would be closed, so you'd be eating C-rations in your own hooch back at the camp. You were always up early.

**KILLBLANE:** So, how many people were there in a gun truck crew?

**FREEMAN:** You had three or four on the truck always. You could run the truck with three, but it was best to have four, especially on a maintenance truck. And I think they liked to have four on a gun truck, too.

**KILLBLANE:** What are the jobs?

**FREEMAN:** You had a driver. I had a front 50 gunner and a back 50 gunner, and the mini-guns were mine because they were temperamental and I really didn't want anybody screwing with them. The wiring on them was temperamental and the delinkers were temperamental. Since I was the guy that did all the learning curve on the mini-guns, I just took responsibility for the mini-guns.

**KILLBLANE:** Did you ever have one malfunction on you while you were over there?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah, yeah. They would malfunction on a regular basis because the bolts and firing pins would go bad. And, you could tell that instantly when you were firing. If you were test-firing them, they would sound like a lawn mower. Well, they always sounded like a lawn mower, but these sounded like a lawn mower with a mission. You could tell instantly just listening to them. When you got done firing and looked for the brass on the floor, you had all these rounds that were not fired. You had rounds that were never fired because the firing pins were probably getting worn on the end. I don't know if you know how a firing pin on a mini-gun works, but it follows a little track along until it hits a spot and then it trips. When it trips, a firing pin hits the primer of the round and the trip point assumes everything's seated. If they start getting worn on the end and getting short, they don't get into the primer hard enough to set it off. You had to tear the back end of it far enough apart to get the bolts out. If you had new bolts, that would be great, but most of the time you had to take them, tear them apart, take the firing pins out, put new firing pins and springs in them, put them back together, and put them back in the gun. So, you had to know the mini-guns to take care of them. The delinker was either kicked-in or kicked-out. You can actually run a mini-gun and drop bullets right out the bottom or you can feed them in. The feeder boxes, they could jam up on you because all the stuff was bootlegged. It wasn't like, Here's the General Electric thing for the Cobra or for the Huey. This is how this was made and everything's made to go here." The feeder cable goes down to a feeder box and actually helps drive the ammo up. The gun doesn't have to pull all the ammo, it actually is being pushed up the belt. The exact description of it is a speedometer cable out of a car, housing and shaft. It runs off the motor and it runs down to the driver. Those things were soldered on and they would break. All of a sudden you'd be firing along and the mini-gun would jam up. You couldn't figure out why, so you'd pull the cable off down here, pull the belt out, spin the gun, and find out your drive cable was not working. Then you had to go somewhere and get a little soldering gun and solder the thing back up. A lot of little maintenance items on things. What an education of life you were getting on this thing if you were willing to just jump in and apply common sense and logic to it. I came from a farm where you had to fix tractors, combines, corn pickers, or a pulley up in the barn; simple crap. As a kid, you learned how a cow station works. You couldn't ask somebody, "How do I fix a station for the cows?" You looked at it and how the rest of them worked. "Oh, I see what's wrong." You just apply logic, but a lot of people probably don't ever do that. For me the gun truck and maintenance was natural because I'd apply logic to a thing: "It was working before, why isn't it working now. It's got to be pretty straight-forward. A miracle didn't happen, it just quit. Why?" So, it was a good fit. Paul thinks exactly the same way. When Paul left Vietnam, he knew how to type. He came to Vietnam a clerk, got on a gun truck and got on a gun maintenance truck, and went home where he makes a wonderful living as an automobile mechanic. It's funny how you get thrown those little curves in life. I have to guess that that had some impact on why he opened an



automobile shop. "I fixed Army trucks, I can fix cars." His dad was a truck driver. Why didn't he go home and become a truck driver?

**KILLBLANE:** You mentioned four people is the ideal number. Two on a 50, you on the mini-gun, and then the driver?

**FREEMAN:** That would be four.

**KILLBLANE:** Tell me about some of the ambushes and the procedures you went through.

**FREEMAN:** I was only in two real ambushes in my time over there as far as with the gun truck. The one ambush was a night ambush. Charles Sims was in the same ambush, and we could almost give you the written version of it. We had written it all out. We were on a convoy returning from An Khe and I was already towing a vehicle in. The vehicle had broken down in the An Khe Pass with the gun truck there. I think Sir Charles might have been the gun truck that was there. We were probably most of the way back into Cha-Rang Valley when a wrecker and a gun truck went out. I couldn't even remember what gun truck it was until thirty years later when we talked about this and discovered all this stuff. I was upset because there was a truck left up in there, and people were going to be out there at night and after the bridges started closing. We went back in, refueled, and turned around and went back out without anybody knowing that we were back out on the road.

**KILLBLANE:** You weren't even requested to go out?

**FREEMAN:** They had no clue that Sugar Bear Three was not at Shrang Valley in the compound. The guard at the gate would never even think to stop a gun truck going in and out. They wouldn't question a gun truck coming in or question a gun truck going out, they just wouldn't question it. He probably was wondering why we were turning right to go back toward An Khe at that time of night or late afternoon. We got to the last Korean bridge, which was a bridge we were worried about closing. If you could get that bridge to open, the Koreans would radio all the rest of the bridges and tell them to open them up. But if that one was closed, those guys would sit there all night and the Koreans wouldn't ever let them in. They'd make them sit there unless somebody shot at them or something. Koreans could be ornery, unless you forced them into one position where it was like, "Okay, they're leaving our bridge, they're coming your way . . . Oh, okay, when they get here we'll let them through." We got out there on that bridge and as these guys were coming through the village, they started getting some fire through the tree line from the west side of the road. So, we opened up with the 50 and the mini into the tree line. The NCOIC [Noncommissioned Officer In Charge] of Sir Charles got hit that night. We had an MP vehicle at the end of the convoy. We backed off when we cleared the bridge. It's one of those deals where you don't remember everything that happened. We had to turn around because we were actually heading the wrong way when the ambush started, as far as we were concerned, because the ambush was a quarter of a mile this way. When we got on the bridge we turned around so we'd be heading with the convoy when they came. So, then they turned around up there and we pulled outside the bridge to clear it when these guys started coming through. We wound up with a guy that was slightly injured. He had a minor injury, it was actually a scratch, but he was bleeding and he was in shock. I think it was the original driver who broke

down up in the pass. It was the driver, it wasn't a gun truck driver. We wound up with him on our truck somehow. We took him to a Korean compound and dropped him off. Somebody got him the next day. Everybody got back in and it was viewed as a good thing that we were there and had the bridges open. So, I didn't get in any trouble for being somewhere where I shouldn't have been. Otherwise, it would not probably have been viewed as a random act of kindness. What's weird is that Charles Sims wrote me an email and said, "Okay, I'm going to tell you how I got my Bronze Star." He started talking about this convoy going out and coming back in, and he started talking about the gun truck sitting on the bridge. He said, "I never did get the name of the gun truck that night that was sitting on the bridge, but we were glad they were there with their mini-guns." I wrote Charles back and said, "You know, that's your version of the story. Let me tell you what I remember that happened that night." He got this whole long thing back from me and said, "I can't believe that was you." We just coincidentally hooked up, we didn't even know each other over there. We got hooked up through the ATAV [Army Transportation Association Vietnam] site, and he went on to tell me a story where I was the other gun truck.

**KILLBLANE:** What was the other ambush?

**FREEMAN:** That was the one Larry [SPC4 Larry Dahl, Medal of Honor Recipient] was killed in.

**KILLBLANE:** You were there?

**FREEMAN:** Yes.

**KILLBLANE:** Could you tell me about that one?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah. I actually have the whole thing written out. I'm trying to think if I have it with me or not. I had written it out to send it to Larry's widow. She had asked for it, so I wrote the whole thing out and sent it to her. I don't know if we were the second convoy that morning or not, but we were not the first convoy. We were behind the convoy that got hit. The convoy in front of us cleared the top of the An Khe Pass, and had just gone around the second bend and over a bridge when a tanker got hit. They had their gun trucks, so they got all the rest of the vehicles out of there. They still had gun trucks engaged when we came up over the top of the Pass. Misfits was in front, Brutus was next, and I was in the last truck. By the time we got stopped they were probably about a hundred yards apart. Brutus was just about halfway around a bend in the road right there.

**KILLBLANE:** A few feet away?

**FREEMAN:** About a hundred yards away. You could hear him. I could hear them, but I couldn't see them. I know they were there because I could hear their guns and we had them on the radio. It was kind of a weird deal because Bond wasn't on the truck that day. You developed a relationship with guys that you were running with everyday. You talked on the radio very casually with them. You could say, "Hey One, this is Three. Let's drop five clicks, we need to talk."



**KILLBLANE:** So, you'd drop a few clicks on the radio if you wanted to talk to somebody privately?

**FREEMAN:** Right. Then you didn't have everybody in the whole world listening in on what you wanted to talk about, you just talked in the clear. Sometimes you might've said, "Hey, you want to run over to the PX [Post Exchange] and pick up some sodas or something. I'm going to go to the PX, I'll pick up sodas if you go over to the ice plant and pick up ice and I'll meet you at so-and-so." You know, you just talked." Diaz was on the truck. I didn't know this guy and never had a relationship with him so our communications were probably a little worse that day instead of dealing with Bond. There was small arms fire going on and there was a mountain up there.

**KILLBLANE:** A cutaway embankment?

**FREEMAN:** There was a regular mountain on the right-hand side and a little stream or creek that ran up there, so it created a little depression. That's where we thought we were getting small arms fire from, and that's where they were reporting they were getting small arms fire from. I don't know if you've ever been in contacts or listening to live fire contacts, but everybody's yelling, instantly yelling, and everybody stays on the radio. Everybody forgets to get off the radio. You get excited, you get a lot of adrenaline. You just can't communicate. As long as you think you're hearing return fire, you're popping caps. All of a sudden I heard, "They're on the left, they're on the left." I could hear that on the radio, so I jumped over to the other side of the truck with the mini-gun. I looked and on this side of the road there was this little bank that went up and a slope up there, a little mound on the side of the road. Later, what I was told was that somebody showed up and threw a frag grenade or something into Brutus from that embankment. I lost contact with Brutus. You know, "Bear One are you clear?" I didn't get anything out of Brutus. "Bear Two are you clear?" They said, "Yeah, we're clear." That was Misfits. "Can you see Bear One?" They said, "Yeah, Bear One's down." "What do you mean Bear One's down?" Somebody called in what we called a "dust-off." They already had helicopters up in the air because of the tanker being hit and somebody had already called in a dust-off because they thought the tanker driver was hit. We had the tanker driver on our truck because we were the last vehicle to stop and he ran from his truck. His tanker had gotten hit but not him, and he was hiding in a ditch. As soon as we stopped he ran up and jumped in the back of our truck. So, we had him. From there on out, I don't know; it was really screwed up. We turned around and went back to our convoy, and on top of the An Khe Pass we turned an entire convoy around and went back down to Phu Tai. We were still in Phu Thai. We turned the whole convoy around and took heavy tankers down the An Khe Pass. That was a chore. We never had to go down mountain passes with heavy tankers, we always went down with light. We went back in with that convoy. Misfits was on the other side of the bridge, and they stayed with Brutus. They stayed in An Khe that night, and Brutus didn't come back down till the next day. When they did, we found out that Larry had been killed, and Chuck Huser and Diaz were injured. Mallory was okay, but he was freaked out. The driver never knows what's going on up there because you can't see shit. Everybody's up there and all of a sudden nobody's yelling at you or telling you what to do.

**KILLBLANE:** Did this ambush originate over one truck getting disabled?

**FREEMAN:** Yes.

**KILLBLANE:** How long was that fire-fight?

**FREEMAN:** Who knows? Ten minutes. Ten minutes going on two lifetimes. Who knows? I lost my headset during that ambush. I probably lost 30% of my hearing that day. I couldn't hear what people were saying for almost two days. It sounded like I had a cellophane bag over my head and they were trying to talk to me through that cellophane bag. You could see their lips moving, but their words could not communicate. Your ears come back, and you think everything's okay. It's not really okay, you can just hear again. It was weird. I remember as part of it too that they got helicopters up and they had a gun ship up that was laying down fire in that area. Then they got some tanks fired up because when you came over the top of the Pass after the first bridge, the rest of the bridges into An Khe were manned by Americans, which was weird. Otherwise there were Vietnamese or Koreans on the bridges. The first bridge over the An Khe Pass was Vietnamese, then all the rest were American. They had tanks or APCs [Armored Personnel Carriers] up there, or dusters.

**KILLBLANE:** What was weird about that? From An Khe in was the American sector.

**FREEMAN:** We normally didn't do bridges. The Vietnamese or the Koreans did the bridges. In that sector, for whatever reason, Americans did the bridges. We mostly did not do bridges on QL-19.

**KILLBLANE:** What about helicopter support? Did you usually get it? Was it standard each time you went out the gate?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah. There were some guys saying, "Well, you know, we had a time when we couldn't get helicopters support." I just don't remember it. I just remember we'd get air cover. And air cover would be up so we could go up a pass, and then they'd go back to An Khe. Almost all our air cover came out of An Khe. We'd get to the Mang Yang Pass, and we'd have air cover. Sometimes coming down you didn't have air cover, but I think we always had air cover going up. But who knows, there could have been convoys where we didn't and I just didn't know it. It seemed like we always did. They would come down the UHF [Ultra High Frequency] and they would talk to us. They'd let us know what was going on. I remember one of the most common call signs was Shipper Shark. I'll never forget that because we heard it so much. "This is Shipper Shark Seven, we're up on station, what's the position of your convoy? How many vehicles do you have? Can you give me an identity on your lead vehicle?" It seemed to me they'd ask questions to see if they were watching the right convoy. A lot of times coming out of the Mang Yang Pass they'd get done and they'd be ready to go into An Khe. Well, they were going to follow the road back into An Khe anyway. They would come down and screw with the convoy and the gun trucks. They'd fly real low. Paul had a movie camera and these guys were camera hounds. If you pointed a movie camera at them it was like, "Oh, let's go down and see these guys." Air cover guys were great. We never got close to knowing them. They were Warrant Officers, a different breed of guys who were not typically going to hang out with a bunch of truck drivers. They were pretty approachable and we were in awe of these pieces of equipment, especially the Cobras. If you ever talked to a snake driver, you probably thought you



were talking to God or something. "How did this guy get this great job?" He had all this fire power, and when you watched the snake work it was like, "Holy shit, look at that," because he'd get up there and just sit and shoot off. The thing would back up, and then you'd hear the rip of the Vulcan. And you thought your mini-gun made a noise? Shit, when that Vulcan ripped, baby, you knew, "I don't want to be anywhere around there. I'm glad we're on this side." I thought we had pretty regular, consistent air cover. In my mind, it was a huge deterrent to ambushes. It was definitely the way it needed to be done. Because why would you hit a convoy running thirty mph at the bottom when you could sit up at the top and hit a convoy running three mph? And at the top they'd be all bunched with no place to go. What were you going to do, go backwards? Especially a tanker. A tanker going up those passes at 3 mph was like a fragile thread, like if you were fishing. You don't want to get too big a fish on that thread. You know how far you can push it. Well, most of these guys going up these passes were already in first gear; and that was it, last line of defense. It wasn't, "Second, and if I get in trouble I can go to first." They were in first. If you started losing power and came around a hairpin, you were done. You were done, you couldn't go anywhere. If you made everybody stop going up the mountain because one tanker going three mph got hit, the domino effect was devastating to an already fragile convoy. Some of these guys probably would have stalled five times trying to get their trucks moving again up a pass. The air cover there was well-needed. But, it's surprising how many times at the Mang Yang Pass they were hit at the bottom.

**KILLBLANE:** The bottom? Why?

**FREEMAN:** Because of the elephant grass. Everything down there was really pretty tall. It was a fairly good ambush area. I think they could get back to their tree lines and disappear better. I think that probably because of the elephant grass they couldn't be found as easily, whereas in the Pass helicopters could spot them because it was so rocky and so devoid. If air cover spotted you trying to scramble around the rocks up there, you were dead. Where were you going to go? They'd just blow the hillside out down and around you. But they hid in the Pass, too. Good air cover, I thought.

**KILLBLANE:** I didn't ask you why you named your truck the Untouchable?

**FREEMAN:** It was Ball of Confusion, but it seemed to me that that was not a good name for a gun truck. I had the advantage of looking around at all these names that people had thought up. Snoopy and Red Baron belonged to the 444tc. There was a marriage, Snoopy and Red Baron. They had Blood, Sweat and Tires as their gun/maintenance truck. That came from a song, but it made more sense. Ball of Confusion, to me, did not. I was embarrassed by that name. That didn't define me as running a truck and I didn't like it to define the truck I was going to have. I didn't have a name and I was sitting there thinking of what to do. I was working with these mini-guns trying to figure them out one night and I got to thinking. I remembered a TV series, The Untouchables with Elliot Ness, and they would always go in blasting away with all these guns. And I thought, "Yeah, that's it, the Untouchable. I'll be Elliot Ness." I was a young kid thinking about fantasy things or whatever. I couldn't help myself. I didn't want it to be the Untouchables, because that's about the crew. I wanted the Untouchable because it was about the truck. I must have bounced it off somebody, or I was probably real excited. "Hey, I thought of a name for the truck, what do you think?" Who knows I don't remember ever going to the first sergeant or the

company commander or my platoon sergeant. I had a platoon sergeant, but I didn't even know who the hell he was. Once you got on a gun truck, they kind of just left you alone. They didn't really want anything to do with you. I don't remember ever asking anybody's permission to change the truck's name from Ball of Confusion to the Untouchable. I may have and just don't remember because nobody made a big deal about it, but it wasn't like I had to write up this form, "I propose to change the name of the truck to so-and-so." It was like I decided and it was okay. It seemed to me that there had to be more to it than me just deciding and do it, but I don't remember it.

**KILLBLANE:** Why the red trim?

**FREEMAN:** They were orange and I didn't want to be orange.

**KILLBLANE:** Who was orange?

**FREEMAN:** Brutus was orange. Misfits was white, I think. I don't know. I don't know if Misfits had already changed to orange or not. I don't know why I wanted red. I had just done another truck in orange. Who knows, maybe they said, "Well, we've got some red paint, how's that?" I can't say that I made a decision that I wanted red and hunted until the cows came home for red paint. It was not that definitive. I would like to say the guy who painted the name on the truck [decided on red], but I had the trim painted before the name was on, so I don't know.

**KILLBLANE:** Why mini-guns?

**FREEMAN:** Mini-guns were just cool, no other reason. They were just cool and I had to have them.

**KILLBLANE:** You had to have two? Because there were other trucks that only had one, right?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah. Others were placing 60s on the sides, and whatever went on one side was going on the other side. I don't think it was more than a thought process, it was symmetry. If you were going to have this, you had to have that. I saw mini- guns fire and I didn't need any more convincing than that. "That's what we need on this truck. This truck is going to truly be "The Untouchable." A lot of ego was hanging out there. I don't think that it was a bad ego. In a sense, anybody that really, really wants to excel or succeed in this world has to have an ego. You're not going to be better or faster or sharper than the next guy if you don't have somewhat of an ego, because that's what drives a portion of you to do these things, and the belief that you can. It's like the guys sharing stories last night. I said, "You guys thought you had the best looking gun trucks? Well, we had the best looking guns truck." They said, "Well, everybody's entitled to believe what they believe." I said, "You know, you're right, if you didn't believe that you had the best looking gun truck, you shouldn't have been on it."

**KILLBLANE:** Bounties. Was there a bounty on your truck?

**FREEMAN:** A bounty? I didn't know anything about bounties other than the rumors that were floating around. Bounties, to me, were strictly rumors that somebody would start I don't know



where. You had CID over there, and I don't know if those guys knew things that we didn't, but I never knew a bounty as more than a rumor. Somebody would say, "Oh yeah, Brutus had a bounty on it." There could've been, no way of disputing it or anything. I've heard stories that all the gun trucks got painted black because there was a bounty on a black gun truck, so somebody said, "Well paint all the gun trucks black then." Nobody ever told me to paint the gun truck black. I painted it black because I liked the black. We could have left it green. There were green gun trucks. Big Kahuna never got painted black. I don't know what other trucks were still green. I can't say that there was or wasn't.

**KILLBLANE:** You extended for that tour. Why?

**FREEMAN:** Just for the truck. I didn't want to leave this truck. I had put in my heart and soul into this truck and I had no intention of parting with it. I'm a Michigan farm boy that had never been anybody in his life and all of a sudden I was an NCOIC of a gun truck. I was running up and down the road doing what I wanted everyday for the Army and I was happy where I was at. I didn't give a shit if somebody was shooting at me.

**KILLBLANE:** Who was your new crew for that last year?

**FREEMAN:** Logan left, and then we got a guy named Bonner. Don Thompson came on for awhile, and Males was on for awhile. Robby Robertson was a driver and a gunner on the truck for awhile, but he left and took over Brutus when Rich Bond left. He went from my gun truck to take over his own gun truck, which was good because we bumped heads a little. We were a good crew together. We never had any problems except for the fact that he was a strong-enough individual and he was getting promoted to E-5. He needed to have his own truck, otherwise he would have wanted to start running my truck. He was a good individual to go on another gun truck.

**KILLBLANE:** He had his ego, too, right?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah. He ran his truck, got his crew together, and they did their thing, which was good. Then I got Paul on the truck.

**KILLBLANE:** Paul left right before . . .

**FREEMAN:** Just before I did. Once they wouldn't let me extend again, I had to just write it off, I had to just let it go.

**KILLBLANE:** You were only allowed to extend for six months?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah. I don't know why. I don't know if it was because I was on my second tour and I had extended and you couldn't extend again. Nobody ever gave me a reason except that my request for an extension was turned down.

**KILLBLANE:** Your second request for an extension. They approved your first?

**FREEMAN:** Yeah, they gave me my first extension. Then, when it came time, I put in for a second extension that they turned down. They said, "No, you need to go back. You need to go back to the States." I said, "No I don't, I'm fine." I was not given a choice. I was given a nice ceremony; they gave me a plaque when I was leaving. I didn't leave under bad circumstances, but when they drove me to the airport at Phu Cat in the gun truck - I don't know if I was crying - I was really emotional. It was really, really hard to watch that truck drive away. It was hard for me to leave that truck that day. It was even harder to walk up and see that truck again after thirty years.

**KILLBLANE:** So, you get more emotional talking about that truck than you do about the ambushes?

**FREEMAN:** That truck was more than just ambushes to me. That truck was convoys and maintenance. It was the breakdown's, of its crews working hard, making it through Vietnam and having good memories, because there's hundreds of thousands of guys who went through Vietnam whose memories are not nearly as fond as what we have as gun truckers. We had it great. We had all these toys, all this stuff, and we didn't have to sleep in the bush, we didn't have to do all the crappy jobs, and we drove by Agent Orange while other guys crawled around in it. So, to me, we're obligated to have good memories and not bitch about the Army. That's one thing that I get angry about: Guys want to start bitching about, "We did this or we did that." You know what? We were there logistically. Forget about the war bullshit, we were there as logistical support. It takes fifteen people to support one infantryman in war. We were just some of those people. We were support, we weren't really in the war. Don't bitch about how they ran Vietnam or anything else, just be thankful we had the jobs that we did and we came home . . . Most of us came home. You take the percentage of truck drivers that came home versus 11B20s [infantrymen], and I wouldn't want to have been an 11B20. I'm glad for the job I had. To have guys coming by thirty years later to admire what you did thirty years ago, how many infantrymen get to do that?

**KILLBLANE:** When I listen to people talk about their trucks, they always refer to them by their names as if they were people. That's the thing I'm picking up in these conversations.

**FREEMAN:** It was your partner. You'd get up in the morning and you didn't go out to the gun truck, you went out to the Untouchable, you went out to Brutus. Nobody ever said "Third Platoon Gun Truck" or "First Platoon Gun Truck" or "Second Platoon Gun Truck." Those would have been a big boxes with no names. Once the Army allowed us to have that personalization, it was like, "This doesn't happen in the Army. The Army doesn't let you name your vehicle or paint it the color you want." If you decided you wanted to do this or you wanted to do that, you didn't have to ask somebody, you just did it. "This shit doesn't happen. I got two 241 radios and a monitoring unit on there. I got two antennas. Who ever said I could put two antennas on that truck?" It was so weird. It was really weird to me. You had the discipline of the Army. Everything was just like, "This is the way you lace your boots, this is the way you polish your boots, this is the way you put your patches on, this is the way you do stuff. This is a military vehicle: You line it up and you drain your air tanks, then you start at truck number one and go to truck number fifteen, and that's how they're lined up." Then you see these trucks with



personality. How can you not refer to that truck with a personality? We were allowed to give it to it.

**KILLBLANE:** What's the love affair between men and machines?

**FREEMAN:** Who knows? Because it doesn't matter whether it's airplanes, tanks, or cars. It doesn't matter.

**KILLBLANE:** See, that's what makes your job different from that of the infantrymen. For us, it's the regiment, it's the colors. With you guys it's that love affair with machines; it's the truck, it's the boat, it's the aircraft.

**FREEMAN:** It's an extension of maybe who you want to be and you get something that can do it for you. You can take guys, and maybe they're really poor character-types, but boy they've got the best looking cars you've ever seen. They put their heart and soul into cars and you can't believe it. A guy starts it up and when he starts that car up, he's having his conversation with you. He can't articulate to you what he's feeling or whatever, but there's the love of his life right there. "Listen to that baby purr, can you hear it?" I think it's exposure. If you never went on a gun truck, you don't have the same fond memories of driving a truck in Vietnam because that was just a job. It was just a job.

**KILLBLANE:** You wore them out? Those guys would wear those trucks out and get new ones?

**FREEMAN:** Right. So, to me, there was difference between maintenance on a gun truck, how they were taken care of, and the love that was put in to them versus the tankers that were beat to shit everyday which nobody cared about. There were a few guys that showed up every single day and wanted their truck and were scared to get sick and let somebody else take their truck out because it was going to get screwed up. There were a few of those, but not very many. Orient Express had reefers, and if you can do any homework on the guys that were on the Orient Express, you should look at those trucks. Those trucks were awesome. They had hard cabs on them, they were polished, and they were waxed and detailed, with pin-striping. Probably, if you're allowed to extend a little bit of yourself into it, the Army gets a better return. How do you do that with the infantry? Carve your name into your sniper rifle and say, "Old Betsy?" What do they have? They have each other. Infantrymen probably grow together as a unit because you get to know everything that your buddy's girlfriend likes, because that's what you got talk about. Or you sit there and read letters. You get a letter from home, you don't just read it, you read it to the four other guys that are sitting there because they didn't get any letters. So, vicariously you get to share some Stateside stuff through a letter and these guys get to ask, "Hey, whatever happened to that guy that was going around with your sister? . . . Aw, she dumped him . . . "Oh, really? . . . Someday I'd like to meet your sister when we get back to the States." I could see the same thing with the artillery guys. Any of the guys that had to be there had to be different than motorized. I never lost perspective of the fact that we were there as support. That's what we were, we were support vehicles for guys who were really humping and doing the job in Vietnam.

**KILLBLANE:** What's the significance of Dahl? Everyone speaks of him with reverence and it's not just the Medal of Honor.

**FREEMAN:** That's a hard one for me because I honestly have never sat down and talked with Chuck Huser about how he feels about what happened that day in the truck. I was the most senior NCOIC in all three gun trucks, and I called these guys up and told them we were going to into this ambush and that is what we did. And I explained to Larry's widow that, if I had to do it all over again, I'd make the same call, we'd do the same thing all over again. What I would want to change is Larry getting killed that day. How would I prevent that? I have no idea. I wasn't in control of that shit, I was in control of what I thought was the right thing to do. There was a convoy that was ambushed in front of us and we weren't going anywhere, our convoy stopped. So, if our convoy's stopped, should the three gun trucks just have sat there? To me that wasn't an option. If our convoy was stopped, we were going to go find out what the problem was and be involved in solving the problem or whatever. This thing was less than a mile away from the top of the An Khe Pass, this was not a stretch of the imagination. We weren't going off into la-la land, we were going less than a mile away. It seemed like the right thing to do. I don't know what circumstances could have changed. Could Brutus have pulled up another fifty yards and not have been accessible for this guy to throw a grenade in? Who knows? That's life. That's fate. A guy is going to come down the freeway today and his car is going to roll over and somebody's going to die. Who can control that? Some stuff just doesn't change. It's nice for the family that Larry has gotten a great deal of recognition for his life being lost. They couldn't ask anymore from their country than that. The country has recognized him and there's a ship named after him. Larry's son is in the service, and he doesn't have anything against the country for what happened. Here's a young man that was able to accept that, "My dad was killed in the war in Vietnam." He hasn't said, "I hate the Army, I'm never going to give service to my country." I don't think those thoughts ever crossed his mind. He's a sergeant and he looks like he's going to be a career soldier. That's good. Larry's widow has moved on; she's happily married and she seems like a well-adjusted woman. Life moves on. There's a memory of Larry Dahl that will go on longer than if Larry Dahl had lived. His life is going to get it's due. He didn't get to live it. There's 58,000 other guys that didn't get to live it. There's guys in every war that didn't, and one of them could have been me. It's just how it is. I tell people to this day, "Don't even think that it was a waste, because we did what we did and it's what it was. It doesn't mean that I think the politicians were right on how they handled the Vietnam War, just don't say that what we did was a waste because I know that every day, I did my job. The guy that got killed got up that morning and he was going his job, but don't say it was a waste because you steal everything from him and his family if you say that." To me it's wrong to think that. We were doing what we were doing. Somebody else is wrong. Am I mad at McNamara for the attitude he took fifteen years after the War? You better believe I am. Don't do a turn-around on us, don't turn on us. You're in for a dime, you're in for a dollar. It was a fucked up war, period. Take it for what it was. Korea was a fucked up war. We're still sitting in Korea and it's still screwed up. Larry got killed in a convoy ambush. He evidently in a moment of whatever thought process decided that he needed to make a sacrifice. Instinct? I don't know, I wasn't in that truck. I don't know what his thought process was. I know that Chuck Huser and Sergeant Diaz are closer to knowing the thought process that Larry could have probably had that day. They're the guys that are living with that. They're thankful that Larry did it, but they're also guilty because he did it. Those are the guys that got it tough, because they're living and Larry's not. I'm sure they're happy to see that there's



a ship up there named for Larry and the family's adjusting to it. And, life goes on. We all got up the next morning and said, "This planet doesn't rotate around us." We've got a small world that rotates around us; our family, our kids, our wives, our friends. And they all have to adjust when we're gone.

**KILLBLANE:** When did you go back home? When did you leave Vietnam?

**FREEMAN:** February of '72.

**KILLBLANE:** What was it like going back?

**FREEMAN:** It was okay. I got sent to a unit that was TDY from Fort Sill and we were running experiments with the Apache helicopter and APCs testing TOW weapons systems. It was supposed to be a anti-tank weapon. We were playing little war games two or three days a week. Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays you would run operations, Tuesdays and Thursdays they'd run computer printouts of what was going on, what got hits, and how long it took for the helicopter to detect the things before you got hits or misses. Then the next week you'd only work Tuesdays and Thursdays and we had all the rest of the time off, so it was great. I was working a part-time job in a gas station off base. About two months after we got done with this, they sent films back and called all of us in. We went to this big Quonset hut and they set up a movie thing that showed the TOW in operation in South Vietnam coming off Cobras. They were shooting at tanks and killing tanks, Russian tanks, in the [Central] Highlands. You should have heard all these guys. You'd see it clip the tank and there was nothing, then, "Wvroom!" We thought nothing happened because we saw it hit, but it was designed to go into something. This thing went inside the tank and then, "Wvroom!" These TOWs had a little warhead that was made by some professor up in Berkley, that's what we were told. And this thing was made to pierce armor and then blow up with a fuse. Actually, it was probably a half a second fuse after penetration, then it would blow up. I'm Stateside and it's like, "Okay, this is cool. This is '73 and I'm leaving." The last year of the Army I was ready to leave. Everything was going well and I kept reading the news reports from Vietnam and all of a sudden somebody says, "Hey, you've got to see this." And we saw the helicopters leaving and they were reporting that everybody was bailing out of Saigon and that the U.S. forces were falling. The media was horrible about their reporting and how they were reporting. It was almost like, "Yeah, well, here it is. The forces are falling in South Vietnam, just like we told you was going to happen all along. We told you." It was like we just gave it away. My thought was that we just gave it away. We're the most powerful nation on the planet and we just let this little strip of country kick our ass. Then, for me, life just went on. I was looking for a job.

**KILLBLANE:** What did you do after the war?

**FREEMAN:** I drove a truck for awhile. I drove a truck from '73 to '76, for three years. Then I got a job on construction. I've been doing construction even since '76. It was a good deal for me, construction was a good thing. All through my life, people have asked, "What did you do in Vietnam?" "Oh, well, I've got some photos, let me take them out and show you." People would say, "Wow, that's really cool." I'd say, "Yeah, it really was." The truck was huge. Personally, as an abused kid coming off a farm in Michigan, it was huge. It was something really tangible

and there wasn't some sergeant or somebody in the Army telling me everyday, "You gotta do it exactly like this. You gotta do this." We were free-wheeling.

**KILLBLANE:** It was an expression of yourself.

**FREEMAN:** Yeah. You'd show up in the morning with your truck ready to roll in the convoy. Prepared for us was there were Pepsis on the truck, we had C-rations picked up from wherever, we had a full set of tires on the truck, the truck was mechanically ready to go, it was clean, and we were ready to go out and do test-firing on the hill. I'm sure you've seen the line up spot at the Ponderosa with the gun trucks. You were ready to go up to do your thing on the test-fire range and come in there proud as a puppy with everybody standing up looking good holding their weapons. Then you'd be back in your spot along with all the other gun trucks. There was a lot of pride, a tremendous amount of pride in the gun truckers. With the tanker drivers there was a disassociation. They were second-class citizens. I was a gun truck guy!, I was somebody!; I could be somebody other than Michigan farm boy in life.

**KILLBLANE:** So, how did that change your life?

**FREEMAN:** Because I believed I could do that anytime in my life. If I could do it then, I could do it anytime. I could be somebody. When I was a brand-new laborer in construction, I was like, "Guess what? I can dig ditches better than anybody else. It doesn't matter, I can put the sprinkler pipe in here better than anybody else. Watch me." People did watch. Sure, some got jealous, but mostly it was like, "Wow, that Untouchable was really something." . When I was driving trucks I lost my license because I had too many speeding tickets. I had to do something, and a guy offers me a job in construction. But he said, "All I need is laborers right now." I said, "Okay, all I need to do." It was like, "Wow, look at this guy dig ditches." If you tried hard to do anything people were going to go, "Wow, look at this guy." So, I got that little bit of attention back. I started out \$3 an hour in June in 1976 in construction, and in November I was making \$6.75 an hour. I was in charge of the entire labor crew on a shopping center project. It allowed me to believe in myself. All I had to do was do whatever in life and just do it with enthusiasm. Try to do the right things and guess what? Good things will happen. That gun truck started all that. Up until that time I was just another GI [Government Issue]. Somebody was telling me where to be, when to be, it was what you were supposed to do in the Army. Individual things were not promoted.

**KILLBLANE:** This is great. Is there anything else you can think of adding?

**FREEMAN:** No. The only thing I can say is the same thing I said on Peggy's site about the gun trucks. I got the fortune of going over there and seeing all the other gun trucks and everything. There are a whole lot of gun truck guys that were in a lot of ambushes early on. Each of these guys should understand that the truck that Bill built represented their work. Those mini-guns represented their idea of putting mini-guns on the truck. Being a good gun maintenance truck came from all of their examples, of the guys that went before me. It really has little to do with me other than that truck looked like I wanted it to look. All the hard work came from those guys who laid the groundwork for us. That's the thing I try to make these guys understand on Peggy's site.



**KILLBLANE:** Thank you.